LOOKING FOR KELLY DAHL

I

Chiaroscuro

I awoke in camp that morning to find the highway to Boulder gone, the sky empty of contrails, and the aspen leaves a bright autumn gold despite what should have been a midsummer day, but after bouncing the Jeep across four miles of forest and rocky ridgeline to the back of the Flatirons, it was the sight of the Inland Sea that stopped me cold.

“Damn,” I muttered, getting out of the Jeep and walking to the edge of the cliff.

Where the foothills and plains should have been, the great sea stretched away east to the horizon and beyond. Torpid waves lapped up against the muddy shores below. Where the stone-box towers of NCAR, the National Center for Atmospheric Research, had risen below the sandstone slabs of the Flatirons, now there were only shrub-stippled swamps and muddy inlets. Of Boulder, there was no sign—neither of its oasis of trees nor of its low buildings. Highway 36 did not cut its accustomed swath over the hillside southeast to Denver. No roads were visible. The high rises of Denver were gone. All of Denver was gone. Only the Inland Sea stretched east and north and south as far as I could see, its color the gray-blue I remembered from Lake Michigan in my youth, its wave action desultory, its sound more the halfhearted lapping of a large lake than the surf crash of a real ocean.

“Damn,” I said again and pulled the Remington from its scabbard behind the driver’s seat of the Jeep. Using the twenty-power sight, I scanned the gulleys leading down between the Flatirons to the swamps and shoreline. There were no roads, no paths, not even visible animal trails. I planted my foot on a low boulder, braced my arm on my knee, and tried to keep the scope steady as I panned right to left along the long strip of dark shoreline.

Footprints in the mud: one set, leading from the gully just below where I stood on what someday would be named Flagstaff Mountain and crossing to a small rowboat pulled up on the sand just beyond the curl of waves. No one was in the rowboat. No tracks led away from it.

A bit of color and motion caught my eye a few hundred meters out from the shore and I raised the rifle, trying to steady the scope on a bobbing bit of yellow. There was a float out there, just beyond the shallows.

I lowered the Remington and took a step closer to the drop-off. There was no way that I could get the Jeep down there—at least not without spending hours or days cutting a path through the thick growth of ponderosa and lodgepole pine that grew in the gully. And even then I would have to use the winch to lower the Jeep over boulders and near-vertical patches. It would not be worth the effort to take the vehicle. But it would require an hour or more to hike down from here.

For what?I thought. The rowboat and buoy would be another red herring, another Kelly Dahl joke.Or she’s trying to lure me out there on the water so that she can get a clean shot.

“Damn,” I said for the third and final time. Then I returned the rifle to its case, pulled out the blue daypack, checked to make sure that the rations, water bottles, and .38 were in place, tugged on the pack, shifted the Ka-bar knife in its sheath along my belt so that I could get to it in one movement, set the rifle scabbard in the crook of my arm, took one last look at the Jeep and its contents, and began the long descent.

Kelly, you’re sloppy,I thought as I slid down the muddy slope, using aspens as handholds.Nothing’s consistent. You’ve screwed this up just like you did the Triassic yesterday.

This particular Inland Sea could be from one of several eras—the late Cretaceous for one, the late Jurassic for another—but in the former era, some seventy-five million years ago, the great interior sea would have pushed much further west than here, into Utah and beyond, and the Rocky Mountains I could see twenty miles to the west would have been in the process of being born from the remnants of Pacific islands that had dotted an ocean covering California. The slabs of Flatirons now rising above me would exist only as a layer of soft substrata. Conversely, if it were the mid-Jurassic, almost a hundred million years earlier than the Cretaceous, this would all be part of a warm, shallow sea stretching down from Canada, ending in a shore winding along northern New Mexico. There would be a huge saline lake south of there, the mudflats of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico stretching as a narrow isthmus for almost two hundred miles between the two bodies of water. This area of central Colorado would be an island, but still without mountains and Flatirons.

You got it all wrong, Kelly. I’d give this a D-.There was no answer.Shit, this isn’t even thatgood. An F. Still silence.

Nor were the flora and fauna correct. Instead of the aspen and pine trees through which I now descended, this area should have been forested during the Jurassic by tall, slender, cycadlike trees, festooned with petals and cones; the undergrowth would not be the juniper bushes I was picking my way around but exotic scouring rushes displaying leaves like banana plants. The late-Cretaceous flora would have been more familiar to the eye—low, broad-leaved trees, towering conifers—but the blossoms would be profuse, tropical, and exotic—with the scent of huge, magnolialike blossoms perfuming the humid air.

The air was neither hot nor humid. It was a midautumn Colorado day. The only blossoms I saw were the faded flowers on small cacti underfoot.

The fauna were wrong. And dull. Dinosaurs existed in both the Cretaceous and Jurassic, but the only animals I had seen this fine morning were some ravens, three white-tailed deer hustling for cover a mile before I reached the cliffs, and some golden-mantled ground squirrels near the top of the Flatirons. Unless a plesiosaur raised its scrawny neck out of the water below, my guess was that the Inland Sea had been transplanted to our era. I had been mildly disappointed the last couple of times the chase had taken me through ancient eras. I would like to have seen a dinosaur, if only to see if Spielberg and his computer animators had been correct as to how the creatures moved.

Kelly, you’re sloppy,I thought again.Lazy. Or you make your choices from sentiment and a sense of aesthetics rather than from any care for accuracy. I was not surprised that there was no answer.

Kelly had always been quirky, although I remembered little sentimentality from either of the times I had been her teacher.

I thought,She hadn’t cried the time I left the sixth-grade class to take the high school job. Most of the other girls did. Kelly Dahl was eleven then. She had not shown much emotion when I’d had her in English class when she was . . . what? . . . seventeen.

And now she was trying to kill me. Not much sentiment there, either.

I came out of the woods at the edge of the gully and began following human footprints in the mud across the flats. Whether the Inland Sea was from the Jurassic or the Cretaceous, the person who had crossed these tidal flats before me had worn sneakers—cross-trainers from the look of the sole patterns.Are these tidal flats? I think so . . . the Kansas Sea was large enough to respond to tides.

There was nothing in the rowboat but two oars, shipped properly. I glanced around, took the rifle out to scope the cliffsides, saw nothing there, tossed the pack in the boat, set the Remington across my lap, shoved off through low waves, and began to row toward the yellow buoy.

I half expected a rifle shot, but suspected that I would not hear it. Despite her missed chances a few days earlier, Kelly Dahl was obviously a good shot. When she decided to kill me, if she had a shot as clear as this one must be—she could fire from any spot along the cliff face of the Flatirons—I would almost certainly be hit on her first try. My only chance was that it would not be a fatal shot and that I could still handle the Remington.

Sweating, the rifle now on the thwart behind me, my shirt soaked from the exertion despite the cool autumn air, I thought of how vulnerable I was out here on the chalky sea, how stupid this action was. I managed to grunt a laugh.

Do your worst, kid.Sunlight glinted on something behind the rocks on Flagstaff Mountain. A telescopic sight? My Jeep’s windshield? I did not break the rhythm of my rowing to check it out.Do your worst, kid. It can’t be worse than what I had planned for myself.

The yellow “buoy” was actually a plastic bleach jar. There was a line tied to it. I pulled it up. The wine bottle on the end of it was weighted with pebbles and sealed with a cork. There was a note inside.

BANG, it read.YOU’RE IT .

ONthe day I decided to kill myself, I planned it, prepared it, and carried it out. Why wait?

The irony was that I had always detested suicide and the suicides themselves. Papa Hemingway and his ilk, someone who will put a Boss shotgun in his mouth and pull the trigger, leaving the remains at the bottom of the stairs for his wife to find and a ceiling full of skull splinters for the hired help to remove . . . well, I find them disgusting. And self-indulgent. I have been a failure and a drunk and a fuck-up, but I have never left my messes for others to clean up, not even in the worst depths of my drinking days.

Still, it is hard to think of a way to kill yourself without leaving a mess behind. Walking into the ocean like James Mason at the end of the 1954A Star Is Born would have been nice, assuming a strong current going out or sharks to finish off the waterlogged remains, but I live in Colorado. Drowning oneself in one of the puny reservoirs around here seems pathetic at best.

All of the domestic remedies—gas, poison, hanging, an overdose of sleeping pills, the shotgun from the closet—leave someone with the Hemingway problem. Besides, I despise melodrama. The way I figure it, it’s no one’s business but my own how or why I go out. Of course, my ex-wife wouldn’t give a shit and my only child is dead and beyond embarrassment, but there are still a few friends out there from the good days who might feel betrayed if news of my death came in the black-wrapped package of suicide. Or so I like to think.

It took me not quite three beers in the Bennigan’s on Canyon Boulevard to arrive at the answer; it took even less time to make the preparations and to carry them out.

Some of the few things left me after the settlement with Maria were my Jeep and camping gear. Even while I was drinking, I would occasionally take off for the hills without notice, camping somewhere along the Peak to Peak Highway or in the National Forest up Left Hand Canyon. While not a real off-road type—I hate 4-wheel-drive assholes who pride themselves on tearing up the landscape, and all snowmobilers, and those idiots on motorcycles who befoul the wilderness with noise and fumes—I have been known to push the Jeep pretty hard to get to a campsite far enough back to where I wouldn’t have to listen to anyone’s radio or hear traffic or have to look at the rump end of some fat-assed Winnebago.

There are mineshafts up there. Most of them are dug horizontally into the mountains and run only a few hundred feet back before ending in cave-in or flood. But some are sinkholes, some are pits where the soil has caved in above an old shaft. Some are vertical dropshafts, long since abandoned, that fall two or three hundred feet to rocks and water and to whatever slimy things there are that like to live in such darkness.

I knew where one of these dropshafts was—a deep one, with an opening wide enough to take the Jeep and me. It was way the hell above the canyon back there behind Sugarloaf Mountain, off the trail and marked by warning signs on trees, but someone trying to turn a Jeep around in the dusk or dark might drive into it easily enough. If they were stone stupid. Or if they were a known drunk.

It was about seven on a July evening when I left Bennigan’s, picked up my camping stuff at the apartment on 30th Street, and headed up north on Highway 36 along the foothills for three miles and then west up Left Hand Canyon. Even with the two or three hard miles of 4-wheel-drive road, I figured I would be at the mineshaft before eightP.M. There would be plenty of light left to do what I had to do.

Despite the three beers, I was sober. I hadn’t had a real drink in almost two months. As an alcoholic, I knew that I wasn’t recovering by staying just on this side of the sober line, only suffering.

But I wanted to be almost sober that night. I had been almost sober—only two beers, perhaps three—the evening that the pickup crossed the lane on Highway 287 and smashed into our Honda, killing Allan instantly and putting me into the hospital for three weeks. The driver of the pickup had survived, of course. They had tested his blood and found that he was legally drunk. He received a suspended sentence and lost his license for a year. I was so badly injured, it was so obvious that the pickup had been at fault, that no one had tested my blood-alcohol level. I’ll never know if I could have responded faster if it hadn’t been for those two or three beers.

This time I wanted to know exactly what I was doing as I perched the Jeep on the edge of that twenty-foot opening, shifted into 4-wheel low, and roared over the raised berm around the black circle of the pit.

And I did. I did not hesitate. I did not lose my sense of pride at the last minute and write some bullshit farewell note to anyone. I didn’t think about it. I took my baseball cap off, wiped the faintest film of sweat from my forehead, set the cap on firmly, slammed the shifter into low, and roared over that mound of dirt like a pit bull going after a mailman’s ass.

The sensation was almost like going over the second hill on the Wildcat ‘coaster at Elitch Gardens. I had the urge to raise my arms and scream. I did not raise my arms; my hands stayed clamped to the wheel as the nose of the Jeep dropped into darkness as if I were driving into a tunnel. I had not turned the headlights on. I caught only the faintest glimpse of boulders and rotted timbers and layers of granite whipping by. I did not scream.

THElast few days I have been trying to recall everything I can about Kelly Dahl when I taught her in the sixth grade, every conversation and interaction, but much of it is indistinct. I taught for almost twenty-six years, sixteen in the elementary grades and the rest in high school. Faces and names blur. But not because I was drinking heavily then. Kelly was in my last sixth-grade class and I didn’t really have a drinking problem then. Problems yes; drinking problem, no.

I remember noticing Kelly Dahl on the first day; any teacher worth his or her salt notices the troublemakers, the standouts, the teacher’s pets, the class clowns, and all of the other elementary-class stereotypes on the first day. Kelly Dahl did not fit any of the stereotypes, but she was certainly a standout kid. Physically, there was nothing unusual about her—at eleven she was losing the baby fat she’d carried through childhood, her bone structure was beginning to assert itself in her face, her hair was about shoulder length, brown, and somewhat stringier than the blow-dried fussiness or careful braidedness of the other girls. Truth was, Kelly Dahl carried a slight air of neglect and impoverishment about her, a look we teachers were all too familiar with in the mid-’80s, even in affluent Boulder County. The girl’s clothes were usually too small, rarely clean, and bore the telltale wrinkles of something dredged from the hamper or floor of the closet that morning. Her hair was, as I said, rarely washed and usually held in place by cheap plastic barrettes that she had probably worn since second grade. Her skin had that sallow look common to children who spent hours inside in front of the TV, although I later found that this was not the case with Kelly Dahl. She was that rarest of things—a child who had never watched TV.

Few of my assumptions were correct about Kelly Dahl.

What made Kelly stand out that first day of my last sixth-grade class were her eyes—startlingly green, shockingly intelligent, and surprisingly alert when not concealed behind her screen of boredom or hidden by her habit of looking away when called upon. I remember her eyes and the slightly mocking tone to her soft, eleven-year-old girl’s voice when I called on her the few times that first day.

I recall that I read her file that evening—I made it a practice never to read the students’ cumulative folders before I met the actual child—and I probably looked into this one because Kelly’s careful diction and softly ironic tone contrasted so much with her appearance. According to the file, Kelly Dahl lived in the mobile home park to the west of the tracks—the trailer park that gave our school the lion’s share of problems—with her mother, divorced, and a stepfather. There was a yellow Notice slip from second grade warning the teacher that Kelly’s biological father had held custody until that year, and that the court had removed the girl from that home because of rumors of abuse. I checked back in the single sheet from a county social worker who had visited the home and, reading between the lines of bureaucratese, inferred that the mother hadn’t wanted the child either but had given in to the court’s ruling. The biological father had been more than willing to give the girl up. Evidently it had been a noncustody battle, one of those “You take her, I have a life to live” exchanges that so many of my students had endured. The mother had lost and ended up with Kelly. The yellow Notice slip was the usual warning that the girl was not to be allowed to leave the school grounds with the

biological father or be allowed to speak on the phone if he called the school, and if he were observed hanging around the school grounds, the teacher or her aide were to notify the principal and/or call the police. Too many of our kids' files have yellow Notice slips with that sort of warning.

A hasty note by Kelly's fourth-grade teacher mentioned that her "real father" had died in a car accident the previous summer and that the Notice slip could be ignored. A scrawled message on the bottom of the social worker's typed page of comments let it be known that Kelly Dahl's "stepfather" was the usual live-in boyfriend and was out on parole after sticking up a convenience store in Arvada.

A fairly normal file.

But there was nothing normal about little Kelly Dahl. These past few days, as I actively try to recall our interactions during the seven months of that abbreviated school year and the eight months we spent together when she was a junior in high school, I am amazed at how strange our time together had been. Sometimes I can barely remember the faces or names of any of the other sixth-graders that year, or the sullen faces of the slouching juniors five years after that, just Kelly Dahl's ever-thinning face and startling green eyes, Kelly Dahl's soft voice—ironic at eleven, sarcastic and challenging at sixteen. Perhaps, after twenty-six years teaching, after hundreds of eleven-year-olds and sixteen-year-olds and seventeen-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds taught—suffered through, actually—Kelly Dahl had been my only real student.

And now she was stalking me. And I her.

II
Pentimento

I awoke to the warmth of flames on my face. Lurching with a sense of falling, I remembered my last moment of consciousness—driving the Jeep into the pit, the plunge into blackness. I tried to raise my arms, grab the wheel again, but my arms were pinned behind me. I was sitting on something solid, not the Jeep seat, the ground. Everything was dark except for the flicker of flames directly in front of me.Hell? I thought, but there was not the slightest belief in that hypothesis, even if I were dead. Besides, the flames I could see were in a large campfire; the ring of firestones was quite visible.

My head aching, my body echoing that ache and reeling from a strange vertigo, as if I were still in a plummeting Jeep, I attempted to assess the situation. I was outside, sitting on the ground, still dressed in the clothes I had worn during my suicide attempt, it was dark, and a large campfire crackled away six feet in front of me.

"Shit," I said aloud, my head and body aching as if I were hung over.Screwed up again. I got drunk and messed up. Only imagined driving into the pit. Fuck.

"You didn't screw up again" came a soft, high voice from somewhere in the darkness behind me. "You really did drive into that mineshaft."

I started and tried to turn to see who had spoken, but I couldn't move my head that far. I looked down and saw the ropes crossing my chest. I was tied to something—a stump, perhaps, or a boulder. I tried to remember if I had spoken those last thoughts aloud about getting drunk and screwing up. My head hurt abysmally.

"It was an interesting way to try to kill yourself" came the woman's voice again. I was sure it was a woman. And something about the voice was hauntingly

familiar.

“Where are you?” I asked, hearing the raggedness in my voice. I swiveled my head as far as it would go but was rewarded with only a glimpse of movement in the shadows behind me. The woman was walking just outside the reach of firelight. I was sitting against a low boulder. Five strands of rope were looped around my chest and the rock. I could feel another rope restraining my wrists behind the boulder.

“Don’t you want to ask who I am?” came the strangely familiar voice. “Get that out of the way?”

For a second I said nothing, the voice and the slight mocking tone beneath the voice so familiar that I was sure that I would remember the owner of it before I had to ask. Someone who found me drunk in the woods and tied me up.Why tie me up? Maria might have done that if she had been around, but she was in Guatemala with her new husband. There were past lovers who disliked me enough to tie me up and leave me in the woods—or worse—but none of them had this voice. Of course, in the past year or two there had been so many strange women I’d awakened next to . . . and who said I had to know this person? Odds were that some crazy woman in the woods found me, observed that I was drunk and potentially violent—I tend to shout and recite poetry when I am at my drunkest—and tied me up. It all made sense—except for the fact that I didn’t remember getting drunk, that the aching head and body did not feel like my usual hangover, that it made no sense for even a crazy lady to tie me up, and that Idid remember driving the fucking Jeep into the mineshaft.

“Give up, Mr. Jakes?” came the voice.

Mr. Jakes. That certain tone. A former student. . . I shook my head with the pain of trying to think. It was worse than a hangover headache, different, deeper.

“You can call me Roland,” I said, my voice thick, squinting at the flames and trying to buy a moment to think.

“No, I can’t, Mr. Jakes,” said Kelly Dahl, coming around into the light and crouching between me and the fire. “You’re Mr. Jakes. I can’t call you anything else. Besides, Roland is a stupid name.”

I nodded. I had recognized her at once, even though it had been six or seven years since I had seen her last. When she had been a junior, she had worn her hair frosted blonde and cut in a punk style just short of a mohawk. It was still short and cut raggedly, still a phony blonde with dark roots, but no longer punk. Her eyes had been large and luminous as a child of eleven, even larger and lit with the dull light of drugs when she was seventeen, but now they were just large. The dark shadows under her eyes that had been a constant of her appearance in high school seemed gone, although that might be a trick of the firelight. Her body was not as angular and lean as I remembered from high school, no longer the bone-and-gristle gaunt, as if the coke or crack or whatever she’d been taking had been eating her up from the inside, but still thin enough that one might have to glance again to see the breasts before being certain it was a woman. This night she was wearing jeans and work boots with a loose flannel shirt over a dark sweatshirt and there was a red bandana tied around her head. The firelight made the skin of her cheeks and forehead very pink. Her short hair stuck out over the bandana above her ears. She held a large camp knife loosely in her right hand as she squatted in front of me.

“Hi, Kelly,” I said.

“Hi, Mr. Jakes.”

“Want to let me loose?”

“No.”

I hesitated. There had been none of the old bantering tone in her voice. We were just two adults talking, she in her early twenties, me fifty-something going on a hundred.

“Did you tie me up, Kelly?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

“You’ll know in a few minutes, Mr. Jakes.”

“Okay.” I tried to relax, settle back against the rock as if I were accustomed to driving my Jeep into a pit and waking up to find an old student threatening me with a knife.Is she threatening me with a knife? It was hard to tell. She held it casually, but if she was not going to cut me loose, there was little reason for it to be there. Kelly had always been emotional, unusual, unstable. I wondered if she had gone completely insane.

“Not completely nuts, Mr. Jakes. But close to it. Or so people thought . . . back when people were around.”

I blinked. “Are you reading my mind, Kelly?”

“Sure.”

“How?” I asked. Perhaps I hadn’t died in the suicide attempt, but was even at that second lying comatose and brain-damaged and dreaming this nonsense in a hospital room somewhere. Or at the bottom of the pit.

“Mu,”said Kelly Dahl.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Mu.Come on, don’t tell me you don’t remember.”

I remembered. I had taught the juniors . . . no, it had been the sixth-graders that year with Kelly . . . the Chinese phrasemu. On one levelmu means onlyyes, but on a deeper level of Zen it was often used by the master when the acolyte asked a stupid, unanswerable, or wrongheaded question such as “Does a dog have the Buddha-nature?” The Master would answer only,Mu, meaning—I say “yes” but mean “no,” but the actual answer is—Unask the question.

“Okay,” I said, “then tell me why I’m tied up.”

“Mu,”said Kelly Dahl. She got to her feet and towered over me. Flames danced on the knife blade.

I shrugged, although the tight ropes left that as something less than a graceful movement. “Fine,” I said. I was tired and scared and disoriented and angry. “Fuck it.”If you can read my mind, you goddamn neurotic, read this. I pictured a raised middle finger.And sit on it and swivel.

Kelly Dahl laughed. I had heard her laugh very few times in sixth grade, not

at all in eleventh grade, but this was the same memorable sound I had heard those few times—wild but not quite crazy, pleasant but with far too much edge to be called sweet.

Now she crouched in front of me, the long knife blade pointed at my eyes. “Are you ready to start the game, Mr. Jakes?”

“What game?” My mouth was very dry.

“I’m going to be changing some things,” said Kelly Dahl. “You may not like all the changes. To stop me, you’ll have to find me and stop me.”

I licked my lips. The knife had not wavered during her little speech. “What do you mean, stop you?”

“Stop me. Kill me if you can. Stop me.”

Oh, shit . . . the poor girliscrazy.

“Maybe,” said Kelly Dahl. “But the game is going to be fun.” She leaned forward quickly and for a mad second I thought she was going to kiss me; instead she leveraged the flat of the blade under the ropes and tugged slightly. Buttons ripped. I felt the steel point cold against the base of my throat as the knife slid sideways.

“Careful . . .”

“Shhhh,” whispered Kelly Dahl and did kiss me, once, lightly, as her hand moved quickly from left to right and the ropes separated as if sliced by a scalpel.

When she stepped back I jumped to my feet . . .tried to jump to my feet . . . my legs were asleep and I pitched forward, almost tumbling into the fire, catching myself clumsily with arms and hands that were as nerveless as the logs I could see lying in the flames.

“Shit,” I said. “Goddammit, Kelly, this isn’t very . . .” I had made it to my knees and turned toward her, away from the fire.

I saw that the campfire was in a clearing on a ridgeline, somewhere I did not recognize but obviously nowhere near where I had driven into the mineshaft. There were a few boulders massed in the dark and I caught a glimpse of the Milky Way spilling above the pines. My Jeep was parked twenty feet away. I could see no damage but it was dark. A breeze had come up and the pine branches began swaying slightly, the needles rich in scent and sighing softly.

Kelly Dahl was gone.

WHENI was training to be a teacher, just out of the army and not sure why I was becoming a teacher except for the fact that it was the furthest thing from humping a ruck through Vietnam that I could imagine, one of the trick questions the professors used to ask was— “Do you want to be the sage on the stage or the guide on the side?” The idea was that there were two kinds of teachers: the “sage” who walked around like a pitcher full of knowledge occasionally pouring some into the empty receptacle that was the student, or the “guide” who led the student to knowledge via furthering the young person’s own curiosity and exploration. The obvious right answer to that trick question was that the good teacher-to-be should be “the guide on the side,” not imposing his or her own knowledge, but aiding the child in self-discovery.

I soon found out that the only way I could enjoy teaching was to be the sage on the stage. I poured knowledge and facts and insights and questions and doubts and everything else that I was carrying around directly from my overflowing pitcher to those twenty-five or so empty receptacles. It was most fun when I taught sixth grade because the receptacles hadn't been filled with so much social moose piss and sheer misinformation.

Luckily, there were a lot of things I was both acutely interested in, moderately knowledgeable about, and innocently eager to share with the kids: my passion for history and literature, my love of space travel and aviation, my college training in environmental science, a love of interesting architecture, my ability to draw and tell stories, a fascination with dinosaurs and geology, an enjoyment of writing, a high comfort level with computers, a hatred of war coupled with an obsession with things military, firsthand knowledge of quite a few remote places in the world, a desire to travel to seeall of the world's remote places, a good sense of direction, a warped sense of humor, a profound fascination with the lives of world historical figures such as Lincoln and Churchill and Hitler and Kennedy and Madonna, a flair for the dramatic, a love of music that would often lead to my sixth-grade class lying in the park across the street from the school on a warm spring or autumn day, sixty feet of school extension cord tapping my mini-stereo system into the electrical outlet near the park restrooms, the sound of Vivaldi or Beethoven or Mozart or Rachmaninoff irritating the other teachers who later complained that they had to close their classroom windows so that their students would not be distracted. . . .

I had enough passions to remain a sage on the stage for twenty-six years.Some of those years, said the inscription on a tombstone I once saw,were good.

One of the incidents I remember with Kelly Dahl was from the week of environmental study the district had mandated for sixth-graders back when they had money to fund the fieldtrips. Actually, we studied environmental science for weeks before the trip, but the students always remembered the actual three-day excursion to an old lodge along the Front Range of the Rockies. The district called those three days and two nights of hiking and doing experiments in the mountains the Environmental Awareness and Appreciation Unit. The kids and teachers called it Eco-Week.

I remember the warm, late-September day when I had brought Kelly Dahl's class to the mountains. The kids had found their bunks in the drafty old lodge, we had hiked our orientation hikes, and in the hour before lunch I had brought the class to a beaver pond a quarter of a mile or so from the lodge in order to do pH tests and to begin my stint as Science Sage. I pointed out the fireweed abounding around the disturbed pond edge—Epilobium angustifoliumI taught them, never afraid to introduce a little Latin nomenclature into the mix—and had them find some of the fireweed's cottony seeds along the bank or skimming across the still surface of the pond. I pointed out the aspen's golden leaves and explained why it shimmered—how the upper surface of the leaf did not receive enough sunlight to photosynthesize, so the leaf was attached by a stem at an angle that allowed it to quake so that both sides received the light. I explained how aspen clone from the roots, so the expansive aspen grove we were looking at was—in a real sense—a single organism. I pointed out the late asters and wild chrysanthemums in their last days before the killing winter winds finished them for another season, and had the children hunt for the red leaves of cinquefoil and strawberry and geranium.

It was at this point, when the kids were reconvened around me in an interested circle, pointing to the fallen red leaves and gall-swollen branches they had gathered, that Kelly Dahl asked, "Why do we have to learn all this stuff?"

I remember sighing. “You mean the names of these plants?”

“Yes.”

“A name is an instrument of teaching,” I said, quoting the Aristotle maxim I had used many times with this class, “and of discerning natures.”

Kelly Dahl had nodded slightly and looked directly at me, the startling, unique quality of her green eyes in sharp contrast to the sad commonness of her cheap K-market jacket and corduroys. “But you can’t learn it all,” she had said, her voice so soft that the other kids had leaned forward to hear it above the gentle breeze that had come up. It was one of those rare times when an entire class was focused on what was being said.

“You can’t learn it all,” I had agreed, “but one can enjoy nature more if you learn some of it.”

Kelly Dahl had shaken her head, almost impatiently I’d thought at the time. “You don’t understand,” she said. “If you don’t understand itall, you can’t understand any of it. Nature is . . .everything. It’s all mixed up. Even we’re part of it, changing it by being here, changing it by trying to understand it . . .” She had stopped then and I only stared. It certainly had been the most I had heard this child say in one speech in the three weeks of class we had shared so far. And what she said was absolutely accurate, but—I felt—largely irrelevant.

While I paused to frame a reply that all of the kids could understand, Kelly had gone on. “What I mean is,” she said, obviously more impatient with her own inability to explain than with my inability to understand, “that learninga little of this stuff is like tearing up that painting you were talking about on Tuesday . . . the woman . . .”

“TheMona Lisa, ” I said.

“Yeah. It’s like tearing up theMona Lisa into little bits and handing around the bits so everyone would enjoy and understand the painting.” She stopped again, frowning slightly, although whether at the metaphor or at speaking up at all, I did not know.

For a minute there was just the silence of the aspen grove and the beaver pond. I admit that I was stumped. Finally, I said, “What would you suggest we do instead, Kelly?”

At first I thought that she would not answer, so withdrawn into herself did she seem. But eventually she said softly, “Close our eyes.”

“What?” I said, not quite hearing.

“Close our eyes,” repeated Kelly Dahl. “If we’re going to look at this stuff, we might as well look with something other than big words.”

We all closed our eyes without further comment, the class of normally unruly sixth graders and myself. I remember to this day the richness of the next few minutes: the butterscotch-and-turpentine tang of sap from the ponderosa pine trees up the hill from us, the vaguely pineapple scent of wild camomile, the dry-leaf dusty sweetness of the aspen grove beyond the pond, the equally sweet decayed aroma of meadow mushrooms such aslactarius andrussula, the pungent seaweed smell of pond scum and the underlying aromatic texture of the sun-warmed earth and the heated pine needles beneath our legs. I remember the warmth of the sun on my face and hands and denim-covered legs that long-ago

September afternoon. I recall the sounds from those few minutes as vividly as I can call back anything I have ever heard: the soft lapping of water trickling over the sticks-and-mud beaver dam, the rustle of dry clematis vines and the brittle stirring of tall gentian stalks in the breeze, the distant hammering of a woodpecker in the woods toward Mt. Meeker and then, so suddenly that my breath caught, the startling crash of wings as a flight of Canada geese came in low over the pond and, without a single honk, veered south toward the highway and the larger ponds there. I think that none of us opened our eyes then, even when the geese flew low over us, so that the magic spell would not be broken. It was a new world, and Kelly Dahl was—somehow, inexplicably, unarguably—our guide.

I had forgotten that moment until yesterday.

ONthe morning after she had tied me up, Kelly Dahl shot the shit out of my Jeep.

I had waited until sunrise to find my way back to Boulder. The night was too dark, the woods were too dense, and my head hurt too much to try to drive down the mountain in the dark.Besides, I had thought at the time with a wry smile,I might drive into a mineshaft.

In the morning my head still hurt and the woods were still thick—not even a sign of a Jeep trail or how Kelly had got my vehicle this far back—but at least I could see to drive. The Jeep itself had multiple abrasions and contusions, a dented fender, flaking paint, and a long gouge on the right door, but these were all old wounds; there was no sign of tumbling down a three-hundred-foot mineshaft. The keys were in the ignition. My billfold was still in my hip pocket. The camping gear was still in the back of the Jeep. Kelly Dahl might be as crazy as a loon, but she was no thief.

It had taken me about an hour to drive up to the mineshaft the previous evening; it took me almost three hours to get back to Boulder. I was way the hell beyond Sugarloaf Mountain and Gold Hill, northeast of Jamestown almost to the Peak to Peak Highway. I had no idea why Kelly Dahl would drag me that far . . . unless the entire mineshaft experience had been an hallucination and she had found me elsewhere. Which made no sense. I put the puzzle out of my mind until I could get home, take a shower, have some aspirin and three fingers of Scotch, and generally start the day.

I should have known things were screwed up long before I got to Boulder. The paved road in Left Hand Canyon, once I crept out of the woods and got onto it headed east, seemed wrong. I realize now that I was driving on patched concrete rather than asphalt. The Greenbriar Restaurant sitting at the exit of Left Hand Canyon where the road meets Highway 36 seemed weird. Looking back, I realize that the parking lot was smaller, the entrance and door painted a different color, and there was a large cottonwood where the flower garden had been for years. Small things on the short ride south to Boulder—the shoulder of Highway 36 was too narrow, the Beechcraft plant along the foothills side of the road looked spruced up and open for business despite the fact that it had been empty for a decade. Nursing my headache, mulling over Kelly Dahl and my screwed-up suicide, I noticed none of this.

There was no traffic. Not a single car or van or cyclist—unusual since those spandex fanatics on bikes are zooming along the Foothills Highway every pleasant day of the year. But nothing this morning. The strangeness of that did not really strike me until I was on North Broadway in Boulder.

No cars moving. Scores were parked by the curb, but none were moving. Nor cyclists hogging the lane. Nor pedestrians walking against the light. I was

almost to the Pearl Street walking mall before I realized how empty the town was.

Jesus Christ,I remember thinking,maybe there's been a nuclear war . . . everyone's evacuated. Then I remembered that the Cold War was over and that the Boulder City Council had—a few years earlier and for no reason known to humankind—voted unanimously to ignore civil defense evacuation plans in case of a wartime emergency. The Boulder City Council was into that sort of thing—like declaring Boulder a Nuclear-Free Zone, which meant, I guess, that no more aircraft carriers with nuclear weapons would be tying up there again soon. It seemed probable that there hadn't been a mass evacuation even if the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant six miles away had melted down—a core of Boulder's politically correct citizenry would protest the advancing radiation rather than evacuate.

Then where is everybody?I had the open Jeep slowed to a crawl by the time I came down the hill to Pearl Street and the walking mall there.

The walking mall was gone: no trees, no landscaped hills, no tasteful brick walkways, no flowerbeds, no panhandlers, no Freddy's hot dog stand, no skateboarders, no street musicians, no drug dealers, no benches or kiosks or phone booths . . . all gone.

The mall was gone, but Pearl Street itself remained, looking as it had before it was covered with bricks and flowerbeds and street musicians. I turned left onto it and drove slowly down the empty boulevard, noticing the drugstores and clothing stores and inexpensive restaurants lining the sidewalks where upscale boutiques, gift stores, and Haagen-Dazs parlors should have been. This looked like Pearl Street had looked when I had come to Boulder in the early '70s—just another western town'sstreet with rents that real retailers could afford.

I realized that itwas the Pearl Street of the early '70s. I drove past Fred's Steakhouse where Maria and I used to have the occasional Friday steak dinner when we'd saved enough money. Fred had thrown in the towel and surrendered to the mall boutique rental prices . . . when? . . . at least fifteen years ago. And there was the old Art Cinema, showing Bergman'sCries and Whispers. It hadn't been a real movie theater for a decade. I could not remember whenCries and Whispers had been released, but I seem to recall seeing it with Maria before we moved to Boulder after my discharge in '69.

I won't list all the rest of the anomalies—the old cars at the curb, the antiquated street signs, the antiwar graffiti on the walls and stop signs—just as I did not try to list them that day. I drove as quickly as I could to my apartment on 30th Street, barely noting as I did that Crossroads Mall at the end of Canyon Boulevard simply was there but drastically smaller than I remembered.

My apartment building was not there at all.

For a while I just stood up in my Jeep, staring at the fields and trees and old garages where my apartment complex should be, and resisting the urge to scream or shout. It was not so much that my apartment was gone, or my clothes, or my few mementos of the life I had already left behind—some snapshots of Maria that I never look at, old softball trophies, my 1984 Teacher of the Year finalist plaque—it was just that my bottles of Scotch were gone.

Then I realized how silly that response was, drove to the first liquor store I could find—an old mom-and-pop place on 28th where a new mini-mall had been the day before—walked in the open door, shouted, was not surprised when no one answered, liberated three bottles of Johnnie Walker, left a heap of bills on

the counter—I might be crazy, but I was no thief—and then went out to the empty parking lot to have a drink and think things over.

I have to say that there was very little denial. Somehow things had changed. I did not seriously consider the possibility that I was dead or that this was like that “lost year” on theDallas TV show some years ago and that I would wake up with Maria in the shower, Allan playing in the living room, my teaching job secure, and my life back together. No, this was real—both my shitty life and this strange . . .place. It was Boulder, all right, but Boulder as it had been about two and a half decades earlier. I was shocked at how small and provincial the place seemed.

And empty. Some large raptors circled over the Flatirons, but the city was dead still. Not even the sound of distant traffic or jet aircraft disturbed the summer air. I realized, in its absence, how much of an expected background that sound is for a city dweller such as myself.

I did not know if this was some half-assed sort of random confusion of the space-time continuum, some malfunction of the chronosynclasticinfidibulum, but I suspected not. I suspected that it all had something to do with Kelly Dahl. That’s about as far as my speculations had gone by the time I had finished the first half of the first bottle of Johnnie Walker.

Then the phone rang.

It was an old payphone on the side of the liquor store twenty paces away. Even the goddamn phone was different—the side of the half-booth read Bell Telephone rather than U.S. West or one of its rivals and the old Bell logo was embossed in the metal there. It made me strangely nostalgic.

I let the thing ring twelve times before setting the bottle on the hood of the Jeep and walking slowly over to it. Maybe it would be God, explaining that I was dead but I’d only qualified for Limbo, that neither heaven nor hell wanted me.

“Hello?” My voice may have sounded a little funny. It did to me.

“Hi, Mr. Jakes.” It was Kelly Dahl, of course. I hadn’t really expected God.

“What’s going on, kid?”

“Lots of neat stuff” came the soft, high voice. “You ready to play yet?”

I glanced over at the bottle and wished I’d brought it with me. “Play?”

“You’re not hunting for me.”

I set the receiver down, walked back to the Jeep, took a drink, and walked slowly back to the phone. “You still there, kiddo?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to play. I don’t want to hunt for you or kill you or do anything else to you or with you.Comprendé?”

“Oui.”This was another game I suddenly remembered from sixth grade with this kid. We would begin sentences in one language, shift to another, and end in a third. I never asked her where an eleven-year-old had learned the basics of half a dozen or more languages.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m leaving now. You take care of yourself, kid. And stay the fuck away from me.Ciao. ” I slammed the receiver down and watched it warily for at least two minutes. It did not ring again.

I secured the second bottle on the floorboards so it wouldn’t break and drove north on 28th until I got to the Diagonal—the four-lane highway that runs northeast to Longmont and then continues on up the string of towns along the Front Range. The first thing I noticed was that the Boulder section of the Diagonal was two-lane . . . when had they widened it? The ‘80s sometime . . . and the second thing I noticed was that it ended only a quarter of a mile or so outside of town. To the northeast there was nothing: not just no highway, but no farm houses, no farm fields, no Celestial Seasonings plant, no IBM plant, no railroad tracks—not even the structures that had been there in the early ‘70s. Whatwas there was a giant crack in the earth, a fissure at least twenty feet deep and thirty feet wide. It looked as if an earthquake had left this cleft separating the highway and Boulder from the high prairie of sagebrush and low grass beyond. The fissure stretched to the northwest and southeast as far as I could see and there was no question of getting the Jeep across it without hours of work.

“Sehr gut,”I said aloud. “Score one for the kid.” I swung the Jeep around and drove back to 28th Street, noticing that the shorter route of the Foothills Highway had not yet been built, and drove south across town to take Highway 36 into Denver.

The fissure began where the highway ended. The cleft seemed to run all the way to the Flatirons to the west.

“Great,” I said to the hot sky. “I get the picture. Only I don’t think I want to stay. Thanks anyway.”

My Jeep is old and ugly, but it’s useful. A few years ago I had an electric winch installed on the front with two hundred feet of cable wrapped around its drum. I powered it up, took the drum brake off, secured the cable around a solid bridge stanchion about thirty feet from the edge of the fissure, set it again, and prepared to back the Jeep down the fifty-degree embankment. I didn’t know if I could climb the opposite slope even in 4-wheel-low, but I figured I’d think of something when I got down there. If worse came to worse, I’d come back, find a bulldozer somewhere, and grade my own way out of this trap. Anything was preferable to playing Kelly Dahl’s game by Kelly Dahl’s rules.

I’d just gotten the rear wheels over the brink and was edging over with just the cable keeping me from falling when the first shot rang out. It shattered my windshield, sending the right-side windshield wiper flying into the air in two pieces. For a second I froze. Don’t let anyone tell you that old combat reflexes last forever.

The second shot smashed the Jeep’s right headlight and exited through the fender. I don’t know what the third shot hit, because old reflexes finally reasserted themselves and I was out of the Jeep and scrambling for cover along the steep cliffside by then, my face in the dust, my fingers clawing for a hold. She fired seven times—I never doubted that it was Kelly Dahl—and each bullet created some mischief, taking off my rearview mirror, puncturing two tires, and even smashing the last two bottles of Johnnie Walker Red where I’d left them cushioned beneath the seat, wrapped in my shirt. I have to believe that last was a lucky shot.

I waited the better part of an hour before crawling out of the cleft, looking at the distant buildings for any sign of the crazy woman with the rifle,

winching the Jeep out on its two flat tires, and cursing over the smashed bottle. I changed the right front with the spare I had and limped into town, thinking that I'd head for the tire place on Pearl—if that was there yet. Instead, I saw another Jeep parked in a lot near 28th and Arapaho and I just pulled in beside it, took one of its new, knobby tires, decided that my spare was in bad shape and the rear tires looked shitty with these new ones on front, and ended up changing all four tires. I suppose I could have just hotwired the new Jeep and have been done with it without all that sweat and cursing under the blazing July sun, but I didn't. I'm sentimental.

In the early afternoon I drove to the old Gart Brothers sporting goods store and chose the Remington with the twenty-power scope, the .38 handgun, the Ka-bar knife of the sort that had been prized in Vietnam, and enough ammunition for the two guns to fight a small war. Then I drove to the old army surplus store on Pearl and 14th and stocked up on boots, socks, a camouflaged hunting vest, backpacking rations, a new Coleman gas stove, extra binoculars, better raingear than I had in the old pack, lots of nylon line, a new sleeping bag, two compasses, a nifty hunting cap that probably made me look like a real asshole, and even more ammunition for the Remington. I did not leave any money on the counter when I left. I had the feeling that the proprietor was not coming back and doubted if I would be, either.

I drove back to the mom-and-pop liquor store on 28th, but the shelves were empty. The hundreds of bottles that had been there three hours before were simply gone. The same was true of the four other liquor stores I tried.

"You bitch," I said to the empty street.

A phone rang in an old glass booth across a parking lot. It kept ringing as I removed the .38 Police Special from its case, opened the yellow box, and slowly loaded the cylinder. It stopped ringing on my third shot when I hit the phone box dead center.

A pay phone across the street rang.

"Listen, you little bitch," I said as soon as I picked it up, "I'll play your game if you'll leave me something to drink."

This time I did expect God to be on the other end.

"You find me and stop me, and you'll have all the booze you want, Mr. Jakes" came Kelly Dahl's voice.

"Everything will be the way it was?" I was looking around as I spoke, half expecting to see her down the street in another phone booth.

"Yep," said Kelly Dahl. "You can even go back up in the hills and drive into a mineshaft, and I won't interfere the next time."

"So I actually drove into it? Did I die? Are you my punishment?"

"Mu,"said Kelly Dahl. "Remember the two other Eco-Week fieldtrips?"

I thought a minute. "The water filtration plant and Trail Ridge Road."

"Very good," said Kelly Dahl. "You can find me at the higher of those two."

"Do the roads continue to the west . . ." I began. I was talking to a dial tone.

III

Palimpsest

On the day I surprised Kelly Dahl near the mountain town of Ward, she almost killed me. I had set an ambush, remembering my training from the good old Vietnam years, waiting patiently where the Left Hand Canyon road wound up to the Peak to Peak Highway. There were only three ways to get up to the Continental Divide along this stretch of the Front Range, and I knew Kelly would take the shortest.

There had been a chainsaw in the old firehouse in Ward. The town itself was empty, of course, but even before Kelly Dahl kidnapped me to this place there were never more than a hundred people in Ward—hippies left over from the ‘60s mostly. The old mining town had been turned into a scrapheap of abandoned vehicles, half-built houses, woodpiles, junk heaps, and geodesic outhouses. I set the ambush on the switchback above the town, cutting down two ponderosa pines to block the road. Then I waited in the aspen grove.

Kelly Dahl’s Bronco came up the road late that afternoon. She stopped, got out of the truck, looked at the fallen trees, and then looked over at me as I stepped around a tree and began walking toward her. I had left the Remington behind. The .38 was tucked in my waistband under my jacket; the Ka-bar knife remained in its sheath.

“Kelly,” I said. “Let’s talk.”

That was when she reached back into the Bronco, came out with a powerful bow made of some dark composite material, notched an arrow before I could speak again, and let fly. It was a hunting arrow—steel-tipped, barbed for maximum damage—and it passed under my left arm, tearing my jacket, ripping flesh on the inside of my arm and above my ribcage, and embedding itself in the aspen centimeters behind me.

I was pinned there for an instant, a bug pinned on a collecting tray, and could only stare as Kelly Dahl notched another arrow. I had no doubt that this one would find its target in my sternum. Before she could release the second arrow, I fumbled in my belt, came out with the .38, and fired blindly, wildly, seeing her duck behind the Bronco as I tore myself free from the tattered remnants of my jacket and leaped behind the fallen log.

I heard the Bronco roar a moment later but I did not look up until the truck was gone, driving over the fallen trees as it turned and accelerating through Ward and back down the canyon.

It took a trip back to Boulder—an early ‘80s version this time but still as empty—to find bandages and antibiotic for the slash on my ribs and inner arm. It is beginning to scar over now, but it still hurts when I walk or breathe deeply.

I carry the Remington everywhere now.

EVENafter I had been teaching drunk for two years, the central administration did not have the balls to fire me. Our Master Agreement specified that because I was tenured, malfeasance and gross incompetence had to be documented by one or more administrators, I had to be given at least three chances to redeem myself, and I was to enjoy due process every step of the way. As it turned out, the high school principal and the director of secondary education were too chickenshit to confront me with any documentation sessions, I didn’t want to redeem myself, and everyone was too busy trying to figure out a way to hide me from sight or get rid of me outside of channels to worry about due process. In the end, the Superintendent ordered the Director of Elementary

Instruction—a gray carbuncle of a woman named Dr. Maxine Millard—to observe me the required number of times, to give me my warnings and chances to rehabilitate myself, and then to do the necessary paperwork to get rid of me.

I knew the days that Dr. Max was going to be there so I could have called in sick or at least not shown up drunk or hungover, but I figured—Fuck it, let them do their worst. They did. My tenure was revoked and I was dismissed from the district three years and two days before I could have put in for early retirement.

I don't miss the job. I missed the kids, even the slumpy, acned, socially inept high school kids. Oddly, I remember the little kids from my earlier years in elementary even more clearly. And miss them more.

A sage without a stage is no sage, drunk or sober.

THISmorning I followed Kelly Dahl's tire tracks down Flagstaff Mountain on a narrow gravel road, came out where Chautauqua Park should be to find Boulder gone and the Inland Sea back again. Only this time, far out on the mudflats, reachable by a long causeway raised just feet above the quicksand beds, was a great island of stone with a walled city rising from its rocks, a great cathedral rising from the stone city, and Michael the Archangel standing on the summit of the tallest tower, his sword raised, his foot firmly planted on a writhing devil, a cock signifying eternal vigilance perched on his mailed foot.

"Christ, Kelly," I said to the tire tracks as I followed them across the causeway, "this is getting a little elaborate."

It was Mont-Saint-Michel, of course, complete down to its last stained glass window and wrought-iron balustrade. I only vaguely remembered showing my sixth-grade class the slides of it. The 12th Century structure had caught my fancy the summer before when I took my family there. Maria had not been impressed, but ten-year-old Allan had flipped over it. He and I bought every book on the subject that we could and seriously discussed building a model of the fortress-cathedral out of balsa wood.

Kelly Dahl's old Bronco was parked outside the gate. I took the Remington, actioned a round into the breech, and went through the gate and up the cobblestone walkway in search of her. My footfalls echoed. Occasionally I paused, looked back over the ramparts at the Flatirons gleaming in the Colorado sunshine, and listened for her footsteps above the lap of lazy waves. There were noises higher up.

The cathedral was empty, but a thin book made of heavy parchment bound in leather had been set on the central altar. I picked up the vellum and read:

Ço sent Rollánz que la mort le trespent

Desuz un pin i est alez curanz

Sur l'erbe verte si est suchiez adenz

Desuz lui met s'espree e l'olifant

Turnat sa teste vers la paiene gent.

This was Eleventh Century French verse. I knew it from my last year of college. This was the kind of thing I had devoted my life to translating in those final months before being drafted and sent around the world to kill

small Asian people.

Then Roland feels that death is taking him;

Down from the head upon the heart it falls.

Beneath a pine he hastens running;

On the green grass he throws himself down;

Beneath him puts his sword and oliphant,

Turns his face toward the pagan army.

I set down the book and shouted into the gloom of the cathedral. “Is this a threat, kid?” Only echoes answered.

The next page I recognized as Thibaut, 13th Century:

Nus hom ne puet ami reconforte

Se cele non ou il a son cuer mis.

Pour ce m’estuet sovent plaindre et plourer

Que nus confors ne me vient, ce m’est vis,

De la ou j’ai tote ma remembrance.

Pour biens amer ai sovent esmaiance

    A dire voir.

Dame, merci! donez moi esperance

    De joie avoir.

This took me a moment. Finally I thought I had it.

There is no comfort to be found in pain

Save only where the heart has made its home.

Therefore I can but murmur and complain

Because no comfort to my pain has come

From where I garnered all my happiness.

From true love have I only earned distress

    The truth to say.

Grace, lady! give me comfort to possess

    A hope, one day.

“Kelly!” I shouted into the cathedral shadows. “I don’t need this shit!” When there was no answer, I raised the Remington and fired a single slug into the huge stained-glass window of the Virgin opposite the altar. The echo of the

shot and of falling glass was still sounding as I left.

I dropped the handmade book into the quicksand as I drove back across the causeway.

WHENI returned home from the hospital after the accident that killed Allan, I found that Maria had emptied our eleven-year-old son's room of all his possessions, our house of all images and records of him. His clothes were gone. The posters and photographs and desk clutter and oldStar Trek models hanging from black thread in his room—all gone. The rocking-horse quilt she had made for him the month before he was born was gone from his bed. The bed was stripped as clean as the walls and closet, as if his room and bed were in a dormitory or barracks, waiting sterilely for the next recruits to arrive.

There were no next recruits.

Maria had purged the photo albums of any image of Allan. It was as if his eleven years simply had not been. The family photo we had kept on our bedroom dresser was gone, as were the snapshots that had been held to the refrigerator door by magnets. His fifth-grade school portrait was no longer in the drawer in the study, and all of the baby pictures were gone from the shoebox. I never found out if she had given the clothes and toys and sports equipment to the Salvation Army, or burned the photographs, or buried them. She would not speak of it. She would not speak of Allan. When I forced the subject, Maria's eyes took on a stubborn, distant look. I soon learned not to force the subject.

This was the summer after I taught my last sixth-grade class. Allan would have been a year younger than Kelly Dahl, twenty-two now, out of college, finding his way in the world. It is very difficult to imagine.

I tracked her to Trail Ridge Road but left the Jeep behind at the beginning of the tundra. There was no Trail Ridge Road—no sign of human existence—only the tundra extending up beyond treeline. It was very cold out of the shelter of the trees. When I'd awakened at my high camp that morning, it had felt like late autumn. The skies were leaden, there were clouds in the valleys below, hiding the lateral moraines, wisps of cloud edge curling up against the mountainsides like tentacles of fog. The air was freezing. I cursed myself for not bringing gloves and balled my hands in the pockets of my jacket, the Remington cold and heavy against my forearms.

Passing the last of the stunted trees, I tried to remember the name for these ancient dwarfs at treeline.

Krummholzcame Kelly Dahl's voice almost in my ear.It means "elfin timber" or "crooked wood."

I dropped to one knee on the frozen moss, the rifle coming up. There was no one within a hundred meters of open tundra. I scoped the treeline, the boulders large enough to hide a human figure. Nothing moved.

I love all the tundra terms you taught us,continued Kelly's voice in my mind. She had done this only a few times before.Fellfield, meadow vole, boreal chorus frog, snowball saxifrage, solifluction terraces, avens and sedges, yellow-bellied marmots, permafrost, nivation depressions, saffron ragworts, green-leaf chiming bells, man-hater sedge . . .

I looked up and out across the windswept tundra. Nothing moved. But I had been wrong about there being no sign of human existence: a well-worn trail ran across the permafrost field toward the summit of the pass. I began following it. "I thought you hated all the technical terms," I said aloud, the rifle

ready in the crook of my arm. My ribs and the inside of my left arm ached from where her arrow had cut deep.

I like poetry.Her voice was in my mind, not my ear. The only real sound was the wind. But her voice was real enough.

Mr. Jakes, do you remember that Robert Frost thing you read us about poetry?

I was two hundred meters out from the last line of krummholz now. There were some house-sized boulders about three hundred meters above and to my left. She might be hiding there. I sensed that she was close.

“Which poem?” I said. If I could keep her talking, thinking, she might not notice my approach.

Not poem, the Frost introduction to one of his books. It was about the figure a poem makes.

“I don’t remember,” I said. I did. I had shared that with the high school juniors only weeks before Kelly Dahl had quit school and run away.

Frost said that it should be the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. He said that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. He said the figure is the same for love.

“Mmmm,” I said, moving quickly across the permafrost field now, my breath fogging the air as I panted. The rifle was gripped in both hands, the cold forgotten. “Tell me more.”

Stop a minute.Kelly Dahl’s voice was flat in my mind.

I paused, panting. The boulders were less than fifty meters from me. The trail I had been following cut across the grassy area once used by the Ute and Pawnee women, old people, and youngsters to cross the Divide. This path looked newly used, as if the Utes had just disappeared over the rock saddle ahead of me.

I don’t think the Indians left trails,came Kelly Dahl’s soft voice in my mind.Look down.

Still trying to catch my breath, dizzy with the altitude and adrenaline, I looked down. A plant was growing on the cushioned terrace between two low rocks there. The wind was whipping snow past me; the temperature must have been in the twenties, if not lower.

Look more closely.

Still gasping for air, I went to one knee on the fellfield. When Kelly Dahl’s voice began again, I took the opportunity to action a round into the Remington’s chamber.

See those little trenches in the soil, Mr. Jakes? They look like smooth runways, little toboggan runs through the tundra. Do you remember teaching us about them?

I shook my head, all the time watching for movement out of the corner of my eye. I truly did not remember. My passion for alpine ecology had burned away with all of my other passions. Not even an ember of interest remained. “Tell me,” I said aloud, as if hearing the echo of her mental voice would reveal her position to me.

They were originally burrows dug out by pocket gopherscame her soft voice, sounding mildly amused.The soil’s so tough and rocky up here, that not even earthworms tunnel, but the pocket gopher digs these shallow burrows. When the gopher goes away, the smaller meadow voles claim them. See where their feet have made the earth smooth? Look closer, Mr. Jakes.

I lay on the soft moss, laying my rifle ahead of me casually, as if just setting it out of the way. The barrel was aimed toward the boulders above. If something moved, I could be sighted in on it within two seconds. I glanced down at a collapsed gopher burrow. It did look like a dirt-smoothed toboggan run, one of hundreds that crisscrossed this section of tundra like an exposed labyrinth, like some indecipherable script left by aliens.

The vole keeps using these little highways in the winter,said Kelly Dahl.Under the snow. Up here we would see giant drifts and an empty, sterile world. But under the snow, the vole is shuttling around, carrying out her business, collecting the grasses she harvested and stored in the autumn, chewing out the centers of cushion plants, munching on taproots. And somewhere nearby, the pocket gopher is digging away.

Something gray did move near the boulders. I leaned closer to the collapsed vole run, closer to the rifle. The snow was suddenly thicker, whipping down the permafrost field like a curtain of gauze that now lifted, now lowered.

In the spring,continued Kelly Dahl’s soft voice in my head,the tops of all these pocket gopher tunnels appear from beneath the melting snowbanks. The ridges are called eskersand look like brown snakes looping around everywhere. You taught us that a pocket gopher up here could dig a tunnel more than a hundred feet long in a single night and move up to eight tons of topsoil per acre in a year.

“Did I teach that?” I said. The gray shape in the snow separated itself from the gray boulders. I quit breathing and set my finger on the trigger guard.

It’s fascinating, isn’t it, Mr. Jakes? That there’s one visible winter world up here on the tundra—cold, inhospitable, intolerable—but the most defenseless animals here just create another world right under the surface where they can continue to survive. They’re even necessary to the ecology, bringing subsoil up and burying plants that will decompose quicker underground. Everything fits.

I leaned forward as if to set my face to the plant, lifted the rifle in a single motion, centered the moving gray form in the crosshairs, and fired. The gray figure fell.

“Kelly?” I said as I ran panting up the tundra, moving from solifluction terrace to solifluction terrace.

There was no answer.

I expected nothing to be there when I arrived at the boulders, but she had fallen exactly where I had last seen the movement. The arterial blood was bright, excruciatingly bright, the single bold color almost shocking on the dim and dun tundra. The bullet had taken her behind the right eye, which was still open and questioning. I guessed that the cow elk was an adult but not quite fully grown. Snowflakes settled on its gray, hairy side, still melted on the pink of its extruded tongue.

Gasping for breath, I stood straight and spun around, surveying the rocks, the

tundra, the lowering sky, the clouds rising like wraiths from the cold valleys below. “Kelly?”

Only the wind responded.

I looked down. The elk’s luminous but fading black eye seemed to be conveying a message.

Things can die here.

THElast time I saw Kelly Dahl in the real world, the other world, had been at a late-season basketball game. I hated basketball—I hated all of the school’s inane and insanely cheered sports—but it was part of my job as low-man-on-the-totem-pole English teacher to dosomething at the damn events, so I was ticket-taker. At least that way I could leave twenty minutes or so into the game when they closed the doors.

I remember coming out of the gym into the freezing darkness—it was officially spring but Colorado rarely recognizes the end of winter until late May, if then—and seeing a familiar figure heading down Arapaho going the opposite direction. Kelly Dahl had not been in class for several days that week, and rumor was that she had moved. I jogged across the street, avoiding patches of black ice, and caught up to her under a streetlight a block east of the school.

She turned as if unsurprised to see me, almost as if she had been waiting for me to follow her. “Hey, Mr. Jakes. What’s happening?” Her eyes were redder than usual, her face pinched and white. The other instructors were sure that she was using drugs and I had finally, reluctantly, come to the same conclusion. There was little trace of the eleven-year-old girl in the gaunt woman’s face I stared into that night.

“You been sick, Kelly?”

She returned my stare. “No, I just haven’t been going to school.”

“You know Van Der Mere will call in your mother.”

Kelly Dahl shrugged. Her jacket was far too thin for such a cold night. When we spoke, our breath hung between us like a veil. “She’s gone,” said Kelly.

“Gone where?” I asked, knowing it was none of my business but feeling the concern for this child rise in me like faint nausea.

Again the shrug.

“You coming back to school on Monday?” I asked.

Kelly Dahl did not blink. “I’m not coming back.”

I remember wishing at the time that I had not given up smoking the year before. It would have been good at that moment to light a cigarette and take a drag before speaking. Instead, I said, “Well, shit, Kelly.”

The pale face nodded.

“Why don’t we go somewhere and talk about it, kiddo.”

She shook her head. A car roared past and slid into the school parking lot, latecomers shouting. Neither of us turned to look.

“Why don’t we . . .” I began.

“No,” said Kelly Dahl. “You and I had our chance, Mr. Jakes.”

I frowned at her in the cold light from the streetlamp. “What do you mean?”

For a long moment I was sure she would say nothing else, that she was on the verge of turning away and disappearing into the dark. Instead, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You remember the year . . . the seven months . . . I was in your sixth-grade class, Mr. Jakes?”

“Of course.”

“You remember how I almost worshipped the ground you walked on . . . excuse the cliché.”

It was my turn to take a breath. “Look, Kelly, a lot of kids in sixth grade, especially girls . . .”

She waved me into silence, as if we had too little time for such formalized dialogue. “I just meant I thought you were the one person who I might have talked to then, Mr. Jakes. In all the middle of what was going on . . . my mother, Carl . . . well, I thought you were the most solid,real thing in the universe that crazy, fucked-up winter.”

“Carl . . .” I said.

“My mother’s boyfriend,” said Kelly in that soft voice. “My . . .stepfather. ” I could hear the heavy irony in her voice, but I could hear something else, something infinitely more ragged and sad.

I took half a step in her direction. “Did he . . . was there . . .”

Kelly Dahl twitched a half-smile in the cold light. “Oh, yeah. He did. There was. Every day. Not just that school year, but most of the summer before.” She looked away, toward the street.

I had the urge to put an arm around her then—seeing the girl there rather than the gaunt young woman—but all I could do was ball my hands into fists, tighter and tighter. “Kelly, I had no idea . . .”

She was not listening or looking at me. “I learned how to go away then. Find the other places.”

“Other places . . .” I did not understand.

Kelly Dahl did not look at me. Her punk mohawk and streaked hair looked pathetic in the flat, cold light. “I got very good at going away to the other places. The things you were teaching us helped—I could see them, you taught them so clearly—and whatever I could see, I could visit.”

My insides were shaking with the cold. The child needed psychiatric help. I thought of all the times I had referred children to school counselors and district psychologists and county social services, always to see little or nothing done, the child returned to whatever nightmare they had temporarily found themselves free of.

“Kelly, let’s . . .”

“I almost told you,” continued Kelly Dahl, her lips thin and white. “I worked up the nerve all that week in April to tell you.” She made a brittle sound that I realized was a laugh. “Hell, I’d been working up nerve all that school year to tell you. I figured that you were the one person in the world who might listen . . . might believe . . . mightdo something. ”

I waited for her to go on. Cheers came from the school gym a block away.

Kelly Dahl looked at me then. There was something wild in her green eyes. “Remember I asked if I could stay after school and talk to you that day?”

I frowned, finally had to shake my head. I could not remember.

She smiled again. “It was the same day you told us you were leaving. That you’d taken a job teaching at the high school, that they needed somebody because Mrs. Webb had died. You told us that there’d be a substitute teacher with us the rest of the year. I don’t think you expected the class to get all upset the way it did. I remember most of the girls were crying. I wasn’t.”

“Kelly, I . . .”

“You didn’t remember that I’d said I wanted to see you after school,” she said, her voice an ironic whisper. “But that was okay, because I didn’t stay anyway. I don’t know if you remember, but I wasn’t one of the kids who hugged you good-bye after the surprise going away party that the kids threw that next Friday.”

We looked at each other for a silent moment. There were no cheers from the gym. “Where are you going, Kelly?”

She looked at me so fiercely that I felt a pang of fear that moment, but whether for her or me, I am not sure. “Away,” she said. “Away.”

“Come to the school on Monday to talk to me,” I said, stepping closer to her. “You don’t have to come to class. Just come by the home room and we’ll talk. Please.” I raised my hands but stopped just short of touching her.

Kelly Dahl’s stare did not waver. “Good-bye, Mr. Jakes.” Then she turned and crossed the street and disappeared in the dark.

I thought about following her then, but I was tired, I’d promised Allan that we would go into Denver to shop for baseball cards the next morning, and whenever I got home late from some school thing, Maria was sure that I’d been out with another woman.

I thought about following Kelly Dahl that night, but I did not.

On Monday she did not come. On Tuesday I called her home, but there was no answer. On Wednesday I told Mr. Van Der Mere about our conversation and a week later social services dropped by the trailer park. The trailer had been abandoned. Kelly’s mother and the boyfriend had left about a month before the girl had quit coming to school. No one had seen Kelly Dahl since the weekend of the basketball game.

A month later, when word came that Kelly Dahl’s mother had been found murdered in North Platte, Nebraska, and that Carl Reems, her boyfriend, had confessed to the crime after being caught in Omaha, most of the teachers thought that Kelly had been murdered as well, despite the chronology to the contrary. Posters of the seventeen-year-old were seen around Boulder for a month or so, but Reems denied doing anything to her right up to his conviction for the

murder of Patricia Dahl. Kelly was probably considered to be just another runaway by the police, and she was too old for her face to appear on milk cartons. It seemed there were no relatives who cared to pursue the subject.

It was early that summer that the pickup came across the centerline and Allan died and I ceased to live.

I find Kelly Dahl by mistake.

It has been weeks, months, here in this place, these places. Reality is the chase, confirmation of that reality is the beard I have grown, the deer and elk I kill for fresh food, the pain in my side and arm as the arrow wound continues to scar over, the increasing fitness in my legs and lungs and body as I spend ten to fourteen hours a day outside, looking for Kelly Dahl.

And I find her by mistake.

I had been returning to the Front Range from following signs of Kelly Dahl south almost to the Eisenhower Tunnel, I had lost her for a full day, and now evening shadows found me south of Nederland along the Peak to Peak Highway. Since there might be no highway when morning came if the time/place shifted, I stopped at a forest service campground—empty of people and vehicles, of course—pitched my tent, filled my water bottles, and cooked up some venison over the fire. I was fairly sure that the last few days had been spent in that 1970-ish landscape in which I'd first found myself—roads and infrastructure in place, people not—and true autumn was coming on. Aspen leaves filled the air like golden parade confetti and the evening wind blew cold.

I find Kelly Dahl by becoming lost.

I used to brag that I have never been lost. Even in the densest lodgepole pine forest, my sense of direction has served me well. I am good in the woods, and the slightest landmark sets me on my way as if I have an internal compass that is never off by more than two or three degrees. Even on cloudy days the sunlight speaks direction to me. At night, a glimpse of stars will set me straight.

Not this evening. Walking out of the empty campground, I climb a mile or so through thick forest to watch the sun set north of the Arapahoes but south of Mt. Audubon. Twilight does not linger. There is no moon. Beyond the Front Range to the east, where the glow of Denver and its string of satellite cities should be, there is only darkness. Clouds move in to obliterate the night sky. I cut back toward the campground, dropping down from one ridge to climb another, confident that this way is shorter. Within ten minutes I am lost.

The sensation of being lost without my rifle, without a compass, with only the Ka-bar knife in its sheath on my belt, is not disturbing. At first. Ninety minutes later, deep in a lodgepole thicket, miles from anywhere, the sky above as dark as the forest below, I am beginning to be worried. I have worn only my sweater over a flannel shirt; it may snow before morning. I think of my parka and sleeping bag back at the campsite, of the firewood stacked in the circle of stones and the hot tea I was planning to have before turning in.

"Idiot," I say to myself, stumbling down a dark slope, almost plunging into a barbed wire fence. Painfully picking my way over the fence—sure that there had been no fences near the campground—I think again,idiot, and begin to wonder if I should hunker down for the cold wait until dawn.

At that moment I see Kelly Dahl's fire.

I never doubt it is her fire—I have been here long enough to know that she is now the only other person in our universe—and, when I come closer, moving silently through the last twenty meters of brush to the clearing, it is indeed Kelly Dahl, sitting in the circle of light from the flames, looking at a harmonica in her hands and seemingly lost in thought.

I wait several minutes, sensing a trap. She remains engrossed in the play of firelight on the chrome surface of the instrument, her face mildly sunburned. She is still wearing the hiking boots, shorts, and thick sweatshirt I had last seen her in three days earlier, just after leaving Mont-Saint-Michel. Her hunting bow—a powerful bend of some space-age composite, several steel-edged killing arrows notched onto the frame—lies strung and ready against the log she sits on.

Perhaps I make a noise. Perhaps she simply becomes aware of my presence. Whatever the reason, she looks up—startled, I see—her head moving toward the dark trees where I hide.

I make the decision within a second. Two seconds later I am hurtling across the dark space that separates us, sure that she will have time to lift the bow, notch the arrow, and let fly toward my heart. But she does not turn toward the bow until the last second and then I am on her, leaping across the last six feet, knocking her down and sideways, the bow and the deadly arrows flying into the darkness on one side of the log, Kelly and me rolling near the fire on the other side.

I guess that I am still stronger but that she is quicker, infinitely more agile. I think that if I act quickly enough, this will not matter.

We roll twice and then I am on top of her, slapping away her hands, pulling the Ka-bar knife from its sheath. She swings a leg up but I pin it with my own, swing my other knee out, squeeze her legs together beneath me with the strength of my thighs. Her hands are raking at my sweater, nails tearing toward my face, but I use my left arm and the weight of my upper body to squeeze her arms between us as I lean forward, the knife moving to her throat.

For a second, as the tempered steel touches the pulsing flesh of her neck, there is no more movement, only my weight on hers and the memory of the moment’s wild friction between us. We are both panting. The wind scatters the sparks of the fire and blows aspen leaves out of the darkness above us. Kelly Dahl’s green eyes are open, appraising, surprised but unafraid, waiting. Our faces are only inches apart.

I move the knife so that the cutting edge is turned away from her throat, lean forward, and kiss her gently on the cheek. Pulling my face back so that I can focus on her eyes again, I whisper, “I’m sorry, Kelly.” Then I roll off her, my right arm coming up against the log she had been sitting on.

Kelly Dahl is on me in a second, lunging sideways in a fluid manner that I have always imagined, but never seen, a panther strike. She straddles my chest, sets a solid forearm across my windpipe, and uses the other hand to slam my wrist against the log, catching the knife as it bounces free. Then the blade is against my own throat. I cannot lower my chin enough to see it, but I can feel it, the scalpel-sharp edge slicing taut skin above my windpipe. I look into her eyes.

“You found me,” she says, swinging the blade down and to the side in a precise killing movement.

Expecting to feel blood rushing from my severed jugular, I feel only the

slight razor burn where the edge had touched me a second before. That and cold air against the intact flesh of my throat. I swallow once.

Kelly Dahl flings the Ka-bar into the darkness near where the bow had gone, her strong hands pull my wrists above my head, and she leans her weight on her elbows on either side of me. “You did find me,” she whispers, and lowers her face to mine.

What happens next is not clear. It is possible that she kisses me, possible that we kiss each other, but time ceases to be sequential at that moment so it is possible that we do not kiss at all. Whatis clear—and shall remain so until the last moment of my life—is that in this final second before seconds cease to follow one another I move my arms to take her weight off her elbows, and Kelly Dahl relaxes onto me with what may be a sigh, the warmth of her face envelopes the warmth of my face, a shared warmth more intimate than any kiss, the length of her body lies full along the length of my body, and then—inexplicably—she continues descending, moving closer, skin against skin, body against body, butmore than that, entering me as I enter her in a way that is beyond sexual. She passes into me as a ghost would pass through some solid form, slowly, sensually but without self-conscious effort, melding, melting into me, her form still tangible, still touchable, but moving through me as if our atoms were the stars in colliding galaxies, passing through each other without contact but rearranging the gravity there forever.

I do not remember us speaking. I remember only the three sighs—Kelly Dahl’s, mine, and the sigh of the wind coming up to scatter the last sparks of the fire that had somehow burned down to embers while time had stopped.

IV
Palinode

I knew instantly upon awakening—alone—that everything had changed. There was a difference to the light, the air. A difference to me. I felt more attached to my senses than I had in years, as if some barrier had been lifted between me and the world.

But the world was different. I sensed it at once. More real. More permanent. I felt fuller but the world felt more empty.

My Jeep was in the campground. The tent was where I had left it. There were other tents, other vehicles. Other people. A middle-aged couple having breakfast outside their Winnebago waved in a friendly manner as I walked past. I could not manage a return wave.

The resident camp ranger ambled over as I was loading the tent in the back of the Jeep.

“Didn’t see you come in last night,” he said. “Don’t seem to have a permit. That’ll be seven dollars. Unless you want to stay another day. That’ll be seven more. Three night limit here. Lots of folks this summer.”

I tried to speak, could not, and found—to my mild surprise—that my billfold still had money in it. I handed the ranger a ten dollar bill and he counted back the change.

He was leaving when I finally called to him. “What month is it?”

He paused, smiled. “Still July, the last time I looked.”

I nodded my thanks. Nothing else needed to be explained.

I showered and changed clothes in my apartment. Everything was as I had left it the night before. There were four bottles of Scotch in the kitchen cabinet. I lined them up on the counter and started to pour them down the sink, realized that I did not have to—I had no urge to take a drink—and set them back in the cabinet.

I drove first to the elementary school where I had taught years ago. The teachers and students were gone for the summer, but some of the office staff were there for the summer migrant program. The principal was new, but Mrs. Collins, the secretary, knew me.

“Mr. Jakes,” she said. “I almost didn’t recognize you in that beard. You look good in it. And you’ve lost weight and you’re all tanned. Have you been on vacation?”

I grinned at her. “Sort of.”

The files were still there. I was afraid that they’d gone to the district headquarters or followed the kids through junior high and high school, but the policy was to duplicate essential material and start new files beginning with seventh grade.

All of the students from that last sixth-grade class were still in the box in the storage closet downstairs, all of their cumulative record folders mildewing away with the individual class photos of the students staring out—bright eyes, braces, bad haircuts from a decade before. They were all there. Everyone but Kelly Dahl.

“Kelly Dahl,” repeated Mrs. Collins when I came up from the basement and queried her. “Kelly Dahl. Strange, Mr. Jakes, but I don’t remember a child named Kelly Dahl. Kelly Daleson, but that was several years before you left. And Kevin Dale . . . but that was a few years before you were here. Was he here very long? It might have been a transfer student who transferred back out, although I usually remember . . .”

“She,” I said. “It was a girl. And she was here a couple of years.”

Mrs. Collins frowned as if I had insulted her powers of recall. “Kelly Dahl,” she said. “I really don’t think so, Mr. Jakes. I remember most of the students. It’s why I suggested to Mr. Pembroke that this thing wasn’t necessary . . .” She waved dismissively toward the computer on her desk. “Are yousure the child was in one of your sixth-grade classes . . . not someone in high school or someone you met . . . after?” She pursed her lips at the nearfaux pas.

“No,” I said. “It was someone I knew before I was fired. Someone I knew here. Or so I thought.”

Mrs. Collins ran fingers through her blue hair. “I may be wrong, Mr. Jakes.” She said it in a tone that precluded the possibility.

The high school records agreed with her. There had been no Kelly Dahl. The manager at the trailer park did not remember the three people; in fact, his records and memory showed that the same elderly couple had been renting what I remembered as the Dahl trailer since 1975. There was no microfilm record of the murder of Patricia Dahl inThe Boulder Daily Camera and calls to North Platte and Omaha revealed no arrest of anyone named Carl Reems at any time in the past twelve years.

I sat on my apartment terrace, watched the summer sun set behind the

Flatirons, and thought. When I grew thirsty, ice water satisfied. I thought of the Jeep and camping gear down in the parking stall. There had been a Remington rifle in the back of the Jeep, a .38-caliber revolver in the blue pack. I had never owned a rifle or pistol.

“Kelly,” I whispered finally. “You’ve really managed to go away this time.”

I pulled out my billfold and looked at the only photograph of Allan that had escaped Maria’s purge—my son’s fifth-grade class picture, wallet-size. After a while I put away the photo and billfold and went in to sleep.

Weeks passed. Then two months. The Colorado summer slipped into early autumn. The days grew shorter but more pleasant. After three hard interviews, I was offered a job at a private school in Denver. I would be teaching sixth-graders. They knew my history, but evidently thought that I had changed for the better. It was Friday when I finished the final interview. They said they would call me the next day, on Saturday.

They were as good as their word. They sounded truly pleased when they offered me the job—perhaps they knew it meant a new start for me, a new life. They were surprised by my answer.

“No, thank you,” I said. “I’ve changed my mind.” I knew now that I could never teach eleven-year-olds again. They would all remind me of Allan, or of Kelly Dahl.

There was a shocked silence. “Perhaps you would like another day to think about it,” said Mr. Martin, the headmaster. “This is an important decision. You could call us on Monday.”

I started to say “no,” began to explain that my mind was made up, but then I heardWait until Monday. Do not decide today.

I paused. My own thoughts had echoed like this before since returning from Kelly Dahl. “Mr. Martin,” I said at last, “that might be a good idea. If you don’t mind, I’ll call you Monday morning with my decision.”

On Sunday morning I picked upThe New York Times at Eads tobacco store, had a late breakfast, watched the 11 a.m. Brinkley news show on ABC, finished reading theTimes Book Review, and went down to the Jeep about one in the afternoon. It was a beautiful fall day and the drive up Left Hand Canyon and then up the hard jeep trail took less than an hour.

The blue sky was crisscrossed with contrails through the aspen leaves when I stopped the Jeep ten feet from the entrance to the vertical mineshaft.

“Kiddo,” I said aloud, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel. “You found me once. I found you once. Do you think we can do it together this time?”

I was talking to myself and it felt silly. I said nothing else. I put the Jeep in first and floored the accelerator. The hood first rose as we bounced over the lip of the pit, I caught a glimpse of yellow aspen leaves, blue sky, white contrails, and then the black circle of the pit filled the windshield.

I hit the brake with both feet on the pedal. The Jeep slid, bucked, slewed to the left, and came to a stop with the right front tire hanging over the open pit. Shaking slightly, I backed the Jeep up a foot or two, set the brake, got out of the vehicle and leaned against it.

Not this way. Not this time.I did not know if the thought was mine alone. I

hoped not.

I stepped closer to the edge, stared down into the pit, and then stepped back.

MONTHShave passed. I took the teaching job in Denver. I love it. I love being with the children. I love being alive again. I am once again the sage on the stage, but a quieter sage this time.

The bad dreams continue to bother me. Not dreams of Kelly Dahl, but Kelly Dahl's dreams. I wake from nightmares of Carl coming into my small room in the trailer, of trying to speak to my mother as she smokes a cigarette and does not listen. I fly awake from dreams of awakening to Carl's heavy hand over my mouth, of his foul breath on my face.

I feel closest to Kelly Dahl at these times. Sitting up on the bed, sweat pouring from me, my heart pounding, I can feel her presence. I like to think that these dreams are an exorcism for her, a long overdue offer of love and help for me.

It is impossible to explain the feeling that Kelly Dahl and I shared that last night in her world . . . inour world. Galaxies colliding, I think I said, and I have since looked up the photographic telescope images of that phenomenon: hundreds of billions of stars passing in close proximity as great spiral clusters pinwheel through one another, gravities interacting and changing each spiral forever but no stars actually colliding. This has some of the sense of what I felt that night, but does not explain the aftermath—the knowledge of being changed forever, of being filled with another human's mind and heart and memories, of solitude ceasing. It is impossible to share the knowledge of being not just two people, but four—ourselves here, and truly ourselves where we meet again on that alternate place of going away.

It is not mystical. It is not religious. There is no afterlife, only life.

I cannot explain. But on some days out on the recess grounds, on some warm Colorado winter days when the sunlight is like a solid thing and the high peaks of the Divide gleam to the west as if they were yards away rather than miles, then I close my eyes as the children play, allow myself to hear the wind above the familiar murmur of children at play, and then the echoes of that separate but equal reality are clear enough. Then all this becomes the memory, the echo.

THEFlatirons are gone, but a dirt road leads to low cliffs that look out over the Inland Sea. The Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and lodgepole trees are gone; the narrow road winds through tropical forests of sixty-foot ferns and flowering cycads the size of small redwoods. Cedarlike conifers let down lacy branches and one unidentifiable tree holds clusters of seeds that resemble massive shaving brushes. The air is humid and almost dizzyingly thick with the smell of eucalyptus, magnolia, something similar to apple blossoms, sycamore, and a riot of more exotic scents. Insects buzz and something very large crashes through the underbrush deep in the fern forest to my right as the Jeep approaches the coast.

Where the Flatirons should be, tidal flats and lagoons reflect the sky. Everything is more textured and detailed than I remember from earlier visits. The sea stretches out to the east, its wave action strong and constant. The road leads to a causeway and the causeway leads across the tidal pools to Mont-Saint-Michel, the city-cathedral and its high walls gleaming in late afternoon light.

Once I pause on the causeway and reach back for my binoculars, scanning the

city walls and parapets.

The Ford Bronco is parked outside the gate. Kelly Dahl is on the rampart of the highest wall, near the cathedral entrance high on the stone island. She is wearing a red sweatshirt and I notice that her hair has grown out a bit. The sunlight must be glinting on my field glasses, for as I watch she smiles slightly and raises one hand to wave at me even though I am still a quarter of a mile away.

I set the glasses back in their case and drive on. To my right, in one of the deep pools far out beyond the quicksand flats, a long-necked plesiosaur, perhaps of the alasmosaurian variety, lifts a flat head studded with its fish-catching basket of teeth, peers nearsightedly across the flats at the sound of my Jeep's engine, and then submerges again in the murky water. I stop a moment to watch the ripples but the head does not reappear. Behind me, where the Flatirons and Boulder once were—will someday be—something roars a challenge in the forest of cycads and ferns.

Focusing on the dot of red high on the miracle that is Mont-Saint-Michel, imagining that I can see her waving now—somehow seeing her clearly even without the field glasses—I get the Jeep in gear and drive on.
Introduction to "Orphans of the Helix"

This story started—as all stories do—as a vague rumination, quickened into focus during aStar Trek: Voyagertelephone pitch, was midwifed into existence by Robert Silverberg, and finally resulted in me missing the Ninth Annual Lincoln Street Water Fight. It is, I think, a decent story, but it wasn't worth missing the water fight.

Some readers may know that I've written four novels set in the "Hyperion Universe"—Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, Endymion, andThe Rise of Endymion.A perceptive subset of those readers—perhaps the majority—know that this so-called epic actually consists of two long and mutually dependent tales, the two Hyperion stories combined and the two Endymion novels combined, broken into four books because of the realities of publishing. An even smaller subset of readers might know that I've vowed not to write any more novels set in this Hyperion universe for a variety of reasons, chief among them being that I don't want to dilute any existing vitality of the epic in a series of profitable but diminishing-returns-for-the-reader sequels.

Still, I never promised not to return to my Hyperion universe via the occasional short story or even novella-length tale. Readers enjoy such universes and miss them when they're gone (or when the writer who created them is gone forever) and this nostalgia for old reading pleasures is precisely what gives rise to the kind of posthumous franchising—the sharecropping-for-profit of a writer's original vision—that I hate so much in today's publishing. But the occasional short work in an otherwise "completed" universe is my attempt at a compromise between retilling tired fields and completely abandoning the landscape.

Or something like that.

At any rate, this idea for a future Hyperion story had not yet become that supersaturated solution necessary before writing can commence, when aStar Trekproducer contacted me about suggesting and writing an episode for theirVoyagerseries. I had been contacted by theStar Trekpeople before and had had to beg off from even discussing such involvement, because of imminent novel deadlines or a film script I was working on or whatever.

Now, I've been known to say unkind things in public places about the Star Trek

universe—callingStar Trek: The Next Generationthe “Neutered Generation” in one guest of honor speech, for instance, or admitting in an interview that I saw Gene Roddenberry’s much-loved vision of the future as essentially fascist. Perhaps the producers had forgiven me for those comments. Or much more likely, probably no one involved in the Star Trek business had ever come across them. In any event, they invited me to come to L.A. to “do a pitch” (a phrase I adore for its appropriate inanity) for their programStar Trek: Voyagerand, when I said that I didn’t have time for such a trip, allowed me to do one over the telephone.

In the meantime, they sent me about ten volumes ofStar Trekbackground material—the “Bible” for the show, tech manuals, character outlines, synopses of previous and future episodes, diagrams and floorplans of Voyager—the whole nine yards. I admit that I enjoyed skimming through all this stuff, especially the “scientific explanation” of such fantasy gimmicks as the transporter and warp drive and so forth. It’s part of the appeal ofStar Trek—all theStar Treks—that there seems to be a complex universe there with rules and limitations and textures only partially glimpsed by the viewer. That is, I think, what fuels so much of the fannish speculation—whether the homoerotic fanzine tales concerning the original crew’s characters or the endless variations on gaming.

So, the producer called me at the appointed date, although I admit that I had all but forgotten about the impending pitch.

“Essentially,” I said, “I’d like to script an episode in which theVoyagercrew doesn’t get its umpteenth failed chance to gethome, but gets an opportunity to get outside the stupidship.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” said the producer. “What do you mean?”

“I mean even though the sets are getting bigger and they have the holodeck and all, these characters are still Spam in a can,” I said. “These guys spend years—freakingyears—in corridors and turbolifts and on that boring post-modernist bridge. Their private quarters look like rooms in a Holiday Express. What if they had the chance to leave the ship forever and get out into space?”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, yeah,” said the producer. “Go on.”

“Okay,” I say, getting the pitch-virus now, warming to the wonderfulness of my own imagination, “say theVoyagerhas to drop out of warp drive and visit a planetary system to replenish its dilithium crystals or to clean the barnacles off its anti-matter nacelles or to get fresh water orwhatever the hell reasonyou’ve always got them diverting into harm’s way . . .”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, go on.”

“But instead of just a Sol-type system, this is a binary system with a red giant and a G-type star and . . .” I went on to explain the brilliant idea of an orbital forest filled with space-dwelling indigenies adapted to hard vacuum, capable of extending magnetic butterfly wings hundreds of kilometers across, of capturing the solar wind and of braving the magnetosphere shockwaves of space like birds in a hurricane, of a giant, programmed eating machine that came once every so many years in a huge elliptical orbit, from the red giant to the G-star and back again, chewing away at the space-dwelling butterflies’ orbital forest. I explained how the “problem” of the story could be the butterfly creatures’ offer to theVoyagercrew—in exchange for just blasting the eating machine with one of their photon torpedoes—of using their nano-machinery to adapt the crew members to deep space, to get them out of

their spam-in-a-can existence and into the freedom of flying between the worlds like migrating doves. Some of the crew members wouldhaveto want that freedom and Captain Whatshername would draw an Alamo-ish line-in-the-sand to decide who would stay, who would fly . . .

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” interrupted the producer gently. “I have a question.”

“Sure,” I said.

“What exactly is a binary system?”

Well, shit.

In the end, their rejection of my pitch centered not so much on astronomical details, but on their anxiety about the cgi budget of that episode. When I pointed out that the astral butterflies wouldn’t be that expensive—blobs against the usual planetary digital imagery, they reminded me that once these butterflies visited the ship, they’d have to be . . . well . . .alien.Star Trek’s view of aliens was human actors with big brows or wrinkly noses or big-corded necks or all of the above. I wanted these huge, insectoidthings.

We parted amicably.

I admit that I was relieved. I had never seen this little seed particle of an idea as aStar Trekepisode. Besides, if I’d been hired to write the damned thing, I would have tried to have the vast majority of the crew desert to become butterflies, with Captain Mrs. Columbo staying behind with her hands on her hips and a few of the top regulars trekking on alone in their Spam can, while the liberated crew flew barrel rolls around the tin-and-plastic-and-carpet spaceship on its way out of the binary system.

Cut to some months later when Robert Silverberg contacted me about writing a long piece for his proposed anthology.Far Horizons.Bob saw the new book as a follow-up to his bestselling anthology, Legends, in which fantasy authors returned to their favorite fantasy universes to give us original tales. He was inviting SF authors of forest-killing mega-epics to reprise their settings and among the other writers contributing would be Ursula K. Le Guin returning to her Ekumen universe, Joe Haldeman dealing with hisForever Waragain, Scott Card unearthing Ender, David Brin doing his Wonderbra thing with his Uplift Universe, Fred Pohl heecheeing us again, and so forth. I don’t have many rules governing my career choices, but not turning down opportunities to insert myself in a pantheon of gods is one of them. I said yes.

Actually, the hard part was summarizing the million or so words of the “Hyperion Cantos” in the “1,000 words or fewer” demanded of the synopsis before my story. The story, of course, was “Orphans of the Helix” and returned my space butterflies, my fallen angels of hard vacuum, to just where they had started—as the mutated human Ousters of the fourHyperionbooks.

And the story was accepted. And it was published. And it was good. (Except for the fact that they printed my name as “David Simmons” in the author profiles at the back of the paperback edition, despite my regular whines and whimpers and milquetoast protests to the publishers—who, it turns out, aremyeditors and publishers at HarperCollins. Perhaps they—and Bob—are trying to tell me something.)

So that’s it. That’s the story of . . .

No, wait. I forgot the most important part.

How “Orphans of the Helix” made me miss the Ninth Annual Lincoln Street Water Fight.

Well, sometime afterFar Horizonscame out, Charles Brown ofLocuscalled to inform me that “Orphans” had won the annualLocusReaders Award for Best Novelette. I’ve won more than a few of these Readers Poll Awards and I admit that they’reveryimportant to me . . . I mean, with the award comes another year’s free subscription toLocusand my goal has been to receive the magazine forever and never pay for it. (A goal I would have realized up to this date, I should point out, were it not forLocus’s small-minded policy of granting onlyone year’s free subscriptioneven if the author wins Readers Poll Awards in more than one category that year.)

So Charles informs me that I’m a winner at about the same time that I’m invited to attend the convention in Hawaii—Westercon 53 in Honolulu, July 1–4, 2000—and I accepted the invitation (a rarity for me, I attend very few SF conventions for reasons of schedules and deadlines.)

“You what?” said my wife Karen. “You’re going to be gone onthe Fourth?”

My daughter Jane put it more succinctly—“Dad, have you lost your mind?”

You see, we live in a neat old neighborhood in a not-terribly-large town along the Front Range of Colorado, near Boulder, and some years ago, in 1992, Jane and I had—on the spur of the moment—photocopied a cartoon invitation and invited everyone on our block of Lincoln Street to show up at high noon on Independence Day, in the middle of the street, with water balloons or squirt guns or hoses or buckets or whatever, to participate in the Lincoln Street Water Fight. “Be there or be dry!” read our invitation. About twenty-five people showed up that first year and we had a ball—throwing water balloons and dousing our friends and neighbors for at least an hour before collapsing from exhaustion.

By 2000, the Lincoln Street Water Fight had grown to include about 75 people. Neighbors canceled travel plans so as not to miss THE WATER FIGHT. Both the east side of Lincoln and the (boo-hisss) west side brought in friends and relatives as ringers to improve their chances during THE WATER FIGHT. Participants included three-year-olds and eighty-three-year-olds. At the stroke of noon on the Fourth, several thousand water balloons (yes, we build and use catapults) are launched and untold gallons of water fill the air as we unleash high-pressure hoses and throw from buckets the size of gondolas. No one wants to miss THE WATER FIGHT.

And the local event has evolved further since 1992. After the water fight, everyone dries off and wanders down to the local school yard—Central School, where I taught sixth grade for eleven years—and we have a long, fun softball game in the playground, again toddlers to senior citizens participating, while a city band plays Sousa marches in Thompson Park across the street. Later in the afternoon, the neighbors and friends gather for a barbecue, rotating which backyard or front porch will host it. About nineP.M. , people wander off—many of us to the nearby golf course—to watch the fireworks display in the fairgrounds just down the hill.

“You’re really going to miss the water fight?” asked Karen.

I’d promised to attend the convention. And attend I did. I enjoyed being in Hawaii. I enjoyed the panels and discussions with fans and fellow pros. I enjoyed the conversations with my editors and publisher at HarperCollins who were in attendance. (“The name’sDan,” I said more than a few times, “notDavid. . .” To no avail.) I enjoyed hanging around with Charlie and the Locuspeople.

I enjoyed receiving the award.

But I flew back to the mainland on the Fourth, catching only the hint of a few remaining fireworks just visible over the port wing late, while flying out of San Francisco, arriving at DIA around midnight and driving home in the dark, my mood as dark as the midnight, knowing what I would find when I woke up the next morning—waterlogged yards, buckets and squirt guns still on the front porch, swimsuits and T-shirts still drying on the shower rod, soggy sneakers on the side steps, a few tiny fragments of 10,000 burst water balloons in the grass where they had been missed during the post-fight cleanup, and our Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Fergie, lying exhausted and water bloated (she tries to drink from every hose during the fight), that July Fifth grin of post-party satisfaction on her face.

I hope you like “Orphans of the Helix.” I enjoyed returning to the Hyperion universe to see what had happened to some of the distant Ousters and the Amoiete Spectrum Helix people. I hope you enjoy this post-Hyperion glimpse of them. I confess that I have some other Hyperion-universe short fiction in mind for the future. But on the off chance that any win any awards that would be handed out on the Fourth of July—well, include me out.

In the summer of 2001, not long before I wrote this introduction, we had the Tenth andBestLincoln Street Water Fight ever. Everyone was there. No one was dry. Later that afternoon, we played softball for hours—no one kept track of the score—while the band played in the park. The barbecue was fun. The fireworks were thebest ever.

You see, as one gets older, one has to decide on priorities. And I have. Literature and travel and fame and accolades are important, but not worth missing the Lincoln Street Water Fight.

Not by a long shot.